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# Early attempts at desistance from crime: Prisoners' prerelease expectations and their postrelease criminal behavior

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## ABSTRACT

Recent attention has been paid to the role of a positive outlook in early stages of the desistance process. The aim of this article is to examine prisoners' own expectations regarding future offending before they are released, and why these expectations come true or not after their release from prison. Longitudinal data were used from in-depth interviews with 24 prisoners who were interviewed at the end of their sentence and three months after release about their future outlook on criminal activities, social capital and agency factors, and current criminal activities. Findings suggest a strong connection between criminal and non-criminal expectations and post-release criminal behavior.

## KEYWORDS

Early desistance; prisoners; reentry

## Introduction

Whether or not people recidivate after being incarcerated is often explained by theories from sociology and economy. Reentering society involves many socio-economic challenges for prisoners, which include meeting basic needs for shelter and food and building social capital such as reconnecting with family and friends (Petersilia, 2003; Visher & Travis, 2003; Harding, Wyse, Dobson, & Morenoff, 2014). Terms of incarceration influence conventional bonds such as work, housing and the quality of social relationships (Hirschi, 1969; Sampson & Laub, 1993) but confinement possibly also means time for correctional rehabilitation. From an economical deterrence perspective, spending a period in prison can reduce the likelihood of future involvement in crime, because of the costs that are associated with serving time (Nagin, Cullen, & Jonson, 2009).

However, the literature also offers psychological explanations for whether or not prisoners recidivate and more recently, attention has been given to first steps in the desistance process and the role of cognitive shifts. Shapland and

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Bottoms (2011) suggested that in early stages of desistance an initial wish to change precedes the beginning of thinking differently about oneself. To refrain from criminal behavior requires a change in how a person sees himself. Paternoster and Bushway (2009) add that also the perception of a feared and desired self in the future contributes to an initial motivation for change.

Prisoners' own expectations of the future reoffending self are an important but rarely investigated topic within the context of resettlement and desistance. Gaining insight into these future expectations and how they interact with early attempts at desistance can enhance the transition from prison to society and long-term desistance (see Apel, 2013; King, 2013; Souza, Lösel, Markson, & Lanskey, 2013). The aim of this article is to examine the expectations of prisoners before they are released addressing the following research questions: (a) To what extent do prisoners' prerelease expectations regarding future criminal behavior compare to their criminal behavior after release? And (b) What reasons do ex-prisoners give for these expectations to come true or not?

### ***Theoretical framework: Expectations, optimism, and desistance***

A central issue in psychological theories on motivated action is that behavior is greatly influenced by the expectations people have about the consequences of their actions (Atkinson, 1964; Bandura, 1977; Rotter, 1966). To perceive a desired outcome as attainable will motivate behavior to achieve this outcome and contribute to perseverance when being faced with adversity (Scheier & Carver, 1992; Taylor & Brown, 1988). However, if the desired outcome is seen as unachievable, people may be less motivated in making an effort towards these goals and eventually give up. Positive expectations and individual goals can be represented in the concept of *possible selves*, where the visualization of a nondesired self in combination with an expected self, strengthens motivational action and well-being (King, 2001; Markus & Nurius, 1986). Behavior then, can be motivated by a state of cognitive dissonance which occurs when a person has two conflicting perceptions of the self and will try to reduce this inconsistency (Festinger, 1962). In addition, a social environment that satisfies needs for autonomy and competence also facilitates motivation (Ryan & Deci, 2000).

Although people in general are biased towards the positive and therefore tend to have a positive future prospect (Taylor & Brown, 1988; Weinstein 1980), optimism that is unrealistic can stand in the way of making plans in achieving goals (Oettingen, 1996). Realistic optimism includes being aware of challenges that will need to be overcome and still trying to make the most of life instead of mere daydreaming without relevant reality checks (Schneider, 2001). Likewise, research on the topic of resilience emphasizes

the importance of facing reality and successfully dealing with the negative consequences of adversity (Harvey & Delfabbro, 2004; Rutter, 2012).

The idea that optimistic expectations and perceptions of the self are important for future behavior is also prominent in criminological literature (Apel, 2013; Giordano, Cernkovich, & Rudolph, 2002; Maruna, 2001; Paternoster & Bushway, 2009). In the Identity Theory of Desistance (ITD; Paternoster & Bushway, 2009), a form of cognitive dissonance seems to take place when the concept of a possible self from psychological research is being supplemented with a *feared self*, which reflects the future if a person would continue crime. Motivation to move away from crime is triggered by the deterrent perception of the feared self combined with a desire for the positive possible self. Visualizing a positive possible self also enhances feelings of agency (being in control over one's future), which is important to motivate behavior towards this future perspective, including shifting away from crime (LeBel, Burnett, Maruna, & Bushway, 2008; Maruna, 2001). Offenders who successfully moved out of crime believed that their actions were the result of their own effort and positive mindset, where the offenders that continued crime tended to blame their situation and failure to external events (Maruna, 2001). Instead of being actors in control (desisters), the persisters saw themselves as being controlled by the outside world.

Another factor that might be associated with whether or not inmates' expectations are being met can be found in Sampson and Laub's (1993) age-graded informal social control theory. According to this theory, attachment to informal social bonds such as family or employment increases social capital, which in turn can lead to desistance. For example, strong interpersonal relationships can serve as a protective bond in trying to abstain from crime, adding perseverance in meeting noncriminal expectations.

### **Previous research**

Some research on the link between offender's future expectations and their postprison behavior has been done. A review of the literature shows that the number of studies is small and that the results differ.

Several of these studies have a cross-sectional design. Maruna's (2001) research contributed a great deal to the topic of desistance when he found a positive relation between optimistic thinking about life after release and actual desistance in the life stories of former prisoners. Where active offenders had little vision of future prospects, desisting offenders "were optimistic that they could make it work" (Maruna, 2001, p. 147), although this link could only be established in retrospect. Schinkel (2014) shed new light on this issue. She interviewed 12 long-term prisoners (sentenced four years or more) and nine different long-term prisoners on license and in comparing the stories of these groups, illustrated that the vision of the future can be uncertain at

times and will get stronger when successes in relation to goals on the outside are achieved. Recently, Nugent and Schinkel (2016) introduced the term “relational desistance” to describe the importance of recognition by others for successful changes because how we act also depends on how others see us. Optimism strengthens the process of desistance and successful attempts at desistance in turn strengthen optimistic views of transformation. Research done amongst probationers supports the idea of belief in one self and agency being low at first and getting stronger when successes on the outside increase (Healy & O’Donnell, 2008). Although cross-sectional research provides valuable knowledge about the scope and nature of future expectations, it does not explore the relationship with future behavior.

Few studies have used a longitudinal approach to link expectations to behavior. To the best of our knowledge, we found five, prospective, longitudinal studies where prisoners were asked (amongst other things) about their future expectations regarding criminal behavior and were retraced for a follow up (Burnett, 1992, 2004; Howerton, Burnett, Byng, & Campbell, 2009; LeBel et al., 2008; Shapland & Bottoms, 2011; Souza et al., 2013; Visher, Kachnowski, La Vigne, & Travis, 2004). The follow up period ranged from three months to 10 years, but there were a few common general findings across the studies.

On one hand, participants from these five studies who were more optimistic about their future seemed to be more successful in dealing with reentry challenges and creating a social context, which reduced the chance of criminal opportunities. Inmates in the research of Souza et al. (2013) who were more positive reported fewer problems with staying out of crime six months after release and vice versa. In this context, it appears as if individuals with an optimistic outlook are more actively engaged in shaping their life and therefore acting with higher levels of agency. For example, in a qualitative study on short term ‘revolving door prisoners’ (Howerton et al., 2009), participants who were optimistic about their chance in society to be crime-free, appeared to be more successful in their endeavors to find a job, which they felt was necessary to be able to refrain from crime. Participants who were pessimistic and continued crime and drugs spoke as if they had little control of their future but they did claim that in order for them to desist from crime, changes would only occur if they “were ready to make a change” (Howerton et al., p. 453). Shapland and Bottoms (2011) found that participants who made a decision to desist were more often actively seeking support from pro-social bonds such as partners and parents.

On the other hand, while the majority of the samples across all five studies reported to have a positive prerelease future expectation (desire to quit crime or made a decision to desist), most of the sample members were rearrested, reconvicted, or reimprisoned again at the follow up. For example, Shapland and Bottoms (2011) followed a group of 113 young adult male prisoners (ages 19–22) and at the time of the first interview 56% said they decided to quit crime in the near future

and another 37% wanted to quit but did not know if they were able to. Nonetheless, after three years, 90 of the 113 young men (79.6%) were reconvicted.

Thus, prisoners tend to be optimistic about their future criminal behavior, but not all prisoners with a positive expectation desist. In fact, a large number of these “positive thinkers” will recidivate but for the ones that manage to stay crime free their positive outlook seemed to contribute to their success in dealing with reentry issues. Achieving success in relation to one’s personal goals and getting recognition from others are found to be important in gaining more confidence, keeping optimistic, and staying away from crime.

Based on literature and previous research it is expected that prisoners with an intention to refrain from criminal behavior will either be engaged in goal-oriented behavior and therefore be more likely to stay crime-free shortly after release. Or, if prisoners are not aware of awaiting difficulties, they will be more likely to reoffend. Furthermore, it is expected that prisoners with ambivalent perceptions of their future criminal behavior are more likely to engage in criminal behavior when success after release is low. Prisoners who expect to continue crime will be less likely to take responsibility for the outcome of their actions and more likely to reoffend.

### ***This study***

The current study contributes to existing knowledge about cognitive processes when transitioning from prison to society by combining a qualitative and longitudinal approach. We zoom in at the first challenging and unstable months after release, which seem crucial in the reentry process and early stages of desistance. How do future expectations start to shape behavior (or the absence of criminal behavior in this case) and how do prisoners perceive this process of change? We examine this in a sample of prisoners in the Netherlands. Knowledge of how expectations of prisoners interact with future criminal behavior is highly relevant in understanding early attempts at desistance and contributes to improving reintegration.

### **The Dutch context**

Every year, approximately 40,000 inmates are released from imprisonment in the Netherlands (Linckens & De Looff, 2015). Almost 95% of the prisoners are released within a year; only 2% spend between two and four years in prison. Similar to recidivism rates for short-term prisoners, the recidivism rates in the Netherlands for these long-term prisoners are approximately 50% (WODC, 2015).<sup>1</sup> In the Netherlands, individuals sentenced to prison for two years or more are conditionally released after having served two thirds of their imposed sentence. After release, they are still under supervision until the

actual end of their sentence. During supervision they can be subjected to certain conditions, such as wearing an ankle bracelet for monitoring purposes and drugs tests or obligatory courses. A prisoner who breaches these conditions can be sent back to prison.

## Design

### Participants

This study was a substudy of the Prison Project (Dirkzwager & Nieuwbeerta, 2014). This project examined prisoners who were: men, born in the Netherlands, ages 18–65, and were held in pretrial detention in the Netherlands. The current study used the same inclusion criteria but also restricted itself to prisoners who (a) had been detained between 2 and 4 years, (b) were convicted for a serious criminal offense by a final decision and the conviction was not in appeal) but (c) were not convicted for a sex offence. Only four participants of the original Prison Project sample were eligible for the current study, so we had to add new participants.

To select the participants, the Dutch Prison Service provided a list of prisoners in all 28 prisons<sup>2</sup> throughout the entire country of the Netherlands, meeting the inclusion criteria and to be released between September 2014 and September 2016. By far the majority of the convicted individuals were still in appeal, so the list contained only 84 eligible long term prisoners held in 13 penitentiary institutions throughout the Netherlands.<sup>3</sup> This small number also mirrors the Criminal Justice system in the Netherlands, where longer-term prison sentences are—by international standard—very rare. When the data collection period of this study ended in October 2015, 44 men could be approached in prison and 36 were interviewed.<sup>4</sup> Eight interviews were excluded because of various reasons<sup>5</sup>

Descriptive characteristics of the participants are presented in [Table 1](#). The men were on average 27 years of age at the in-prison interview and spend

**Table 1.** Descriptive statistics of prerelease prisoners ( $N = 24$ ).

Variable	<i>M</i>	%
Age at entry (range 20–53 years)	27	
Type of offense		
Violence (robbery, assault, kidnapping, homicide)		92
Other (burglary, fraud)		8
Prior convictions		100
Prior detention spells		79
Length of imprisonment in months (range 30–50)	38	
Length of sentence in months (range 30–66)	48	
Partner at prerelease interview		17
Partner at postrelease interview		29
Children		46



between 30 and 50 months in detention. Four participants had a partner during the in-prison interview and maintained this relationship the months following release and another three were involved in a new romantic relationship after release. Almost half of the sample were fathers (with in total 15 children and one stepchild). Although all men had been previously convicted and most of the sample previously imprisoned, five men were serving their first prison sentence. Except for one participant, all of them were still under supervision when interviewed after release.

### **Procedure**

When the prisoners were approached by the interviewer, an explanation was given about the study and it was pointed out that participation was voluntary. It was emphasized that the research was independent of the Netherlands Ministry of Security and Justice or the Dutch Prison Service, and that the information was not shared with inmates, prison staff or other Criminal Justice officials. Participants therefore were interviewed in a private room. The entire in prison interviews took on average 1.5 hours and the interviews were all done by the first author of this article.

At the end of the first interview in prison, participants were asked if the researcher could interview them again after release. To facilitate this, they were asked to give addresses and/or phone numbers of relatives, friends and themselves where we could reach them. To minimize attrition, the interviewer provided participants in prison a contact card containing e-mail and phone number and tried to stay in contact with the interviewees after release by phone, e-mail, or via text messaging service. All 28 ex-prisoners could be located via the given contact information or via their probation officer. One was still detained since the first interview and three refused to participate in the postprison interview when being contacted. In the end, 24 of the 28 participants were successfully interviewed at the follow-up, held approximately three months after their release.

The postprison interviews lasted on average 1.5 hours. Most of the interviews were conducted in interviewees' residences, some in a public location, others at the probation office, and a few in prison (when they were back in prison for another offense). At the end of the interview, participants who were not in prison were offered a €10 compensation for their time and effort, although some declined this fee.

### **Interviews**

The design of both the in-prison and postprison interview was semistructured. During the in-prison interview—to be able to address the main research question on the relationship between expectations and life after



prison—future expectations of the prisoners were measured by asking them how they would see their life after prison and specifically concerning criminal activity: “Do you think you will engage in criminal activity in the future?” And, if applicable, “Why (not)?” In addition information was gathered on social capital topics such as housing and social support, and agency topics such as feelings of control, self-efficacy, and taking responsibility for the direction of events.

The postprison interview, held three months after release, included in addition questions about their experiences since release, current criminal activities, and on whether or not their motivation to quit crime had changed. The ex-prisoners were also asked to reflect on their former expectations of their future criminal behavior and factors that played a role in the process of refraining from criminal activity (e.g., social capital and agency related factors).

This study throws light on the prisoners’ view of his future in the final stage of his sentence. To our knowledge only two prior studies on this topic have used a similar longitudinal and qualitative approach (Howerton et al., 2009; Souza, et al., 2013). So, the results of this study will make a significant contribution to criminology and especially to an understanding of the first steps on the road to desistance of ex-prisoners in the Netherlands.

## **Analyses**

Most in-prison interviews (22 out of 24) and postrelease interviews (18 out of 24) were audio-recorded with permission. During the interviews with the participants that did not permit audio-recording, notes were taken and written up immediately after the interview to minimize the loss of data. All the interviews were transcribed.

Using thematic analysis (Boyatzis, 1998; Braun & Clarke, 2006), themes and codes can be identified from an inductive and a deductive perspective. The focus here was more deductive and theory driven and less data driven. This article therefore does not provide a thick description of all the data, but zooms in on specific aspects of the data and offers a detailed analysis of these aspects (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Themes and codes were derived from the research questions, the interview protocol, theoretical concepts and previous research as described earlier. During the analysis, we also identified codes that emerged from the data. In the first phase the transcripts were read a few times and we could already identify some topics related to the aim of this study (i.e., expectations, criminal activities, and motivation). The next step was to construct a thematic framework based on a list of initial codes to organize the participants views, experiences and motivations for (non) criminal behavior. Then, this thematic framework

was used to code data, applying the labels to fragments of data. Atlas.ti facilitated this process of data management and analysis.

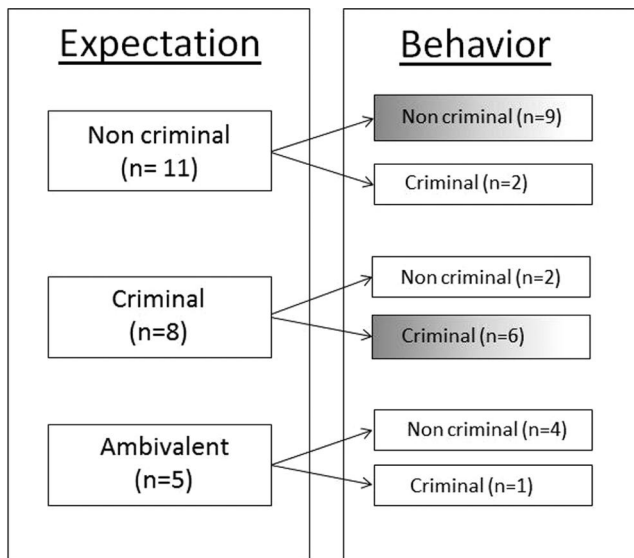
## Results

This study focuses on the extent to which long term prisoners' prerelease expectations regarding future criminal behavior match their criminal behavior after release and on the reasons the exprisoners themselves give for whether these expectations were fulfilled or not.

From the interviews, 19 of the 24 prisoners had clear expectations of their future criminal or non-criminal behavior. After release, 15 of the 19 men (79%) lived up to their own expectations. As [Figure 1](#) shows, nine out of eleven men who expected not be criminally active post prison, said they had been refraining from crime in the three months after release. Similarly, six out of eight men who had a criminal expectation when interviewed in prison were indeed engaged in crime after release.

Not everyone's postrelease behavior was in line with their prerelease expectations. Two men who expected to refrain from crime after prison, were in fact imprisoned again three months postrelease so they failed to live up to their own expectations. Also, two other men expected to be criminally active but it turned out that they did not commit crimes.

In addition, some men did not have clear expectations when interviewed in prison. Four of them did not commit crime(s) after release and one of them did. Next we discuss each these groups in more depth, and also examine what



**Figure 1.** Prerelease future expectations and postrelease actual behavior of long term prisoners.

explanations they themselves mentioned for (not) living up to their own expectations.

### **Results in line with expectations**

Most of the men that predicted noncriminal or criminal behavior after release lived up to their expectations (15 of the 19). On the one hand, almost all men who expected to refrain from crime, mentioned they were indeed not involved in crime in the three months after release. For example Dave expressed his feelings and plans about his future during the in prison interview:

*Dave:* I was thinking, what the hell have I achieved in my life?! Nothing! And what did I always do? Just fooling around so yes, I do want to have a diploma, I was thinking of ICT or in retail. I want to have something to bring me forward despite my criminal record.

*I:* And crime?

*Dave:* No, no, no! I'm, thinking that this has to change, because I have a little one now. And that's the reason that I want to change. I'm working and have all the things sorted out, I can earn my own money. Then you don't need to deal drugs or anything.

After release, he was refraining from criminal activity in line with his plans:

*I:* How about your former criminal activities?

*Dave:* No! That is not on my mind at all. For my daughter I have to get my life together. And I don't want to look over my shoulder all my life, I want to grow. I got a job and I'm set to get my driver's license and start a new study. I really think I can make it, I just have to focus and earn money to be able to afford tuition.

Similarly, Richard (after 2–3 years in prison and being embedded in a criminal environment) recognized the downside of the criminal life and said he wanted to stop:

I'm done with it, because I see now. ... This money is evil. And of course, you can make a lot of money, but the criminal life also has restrictions and conditions and I want to live free, without these conditions. So I'm done ... now it's time, I'm changing I guess. And I'm trying to see the positive in me, I've always been an optimist. Now I just have to be a confident optimist.

Three months after release, he worked and was satisfied with making his own money in a legal way: "I got a job, a good job! I started sending out many resumes and I got invited. There was an assessment and I passed. And I really like it, I don't ever want to be involved in crime anymore."

On the other hand, almost all men who had a criminal expectation when interviewed in prison, were indeed engaged in crime three months postrelease from prison. Tony is a clear example of this pattern. When asked about his expectations before release he mentioned:

Quitting? To be honest ... if I don't make a little extra money on the side, someone like me trying to make it by the book. ... We can never do that. I don't have any papers, but I am creative. I know how to solve things and make money.

At the follow-up interview, he disclosed that he lived up to his own expectations. In the three-month period after release he started to sell drugs: "I'm driving across the country with some kilos of marijuana, but it's more on the downlow."

Similarly, Ab is another man who expected to recidivate and who did just that. Ab expressed in prison right before his release that he was doubtful about serious crimes in the future, but expected he still would be involved in less serious crimes:

There are good things and bad things about criminal life, but right now it is my life. And to be honest, it's the only thing I am capable of doing, I've never done anything else. I can see myself doing something legit, but I will keep selling drugs on the side. But not those serious things anymore.

After release, Ab's activities were in line with his expectations: "Just a bit of dealing and selling. There is a difference between dealing drugs and robbing a store though. I'm done with those big things, I'm taking it easy now."

### ***Ambivalent expectations and their outcome***

Five participants forecasted a rather ambivalent future at the time of the first interview. After release, one of them was engaged in criminal activity. For example, Casper said in prison he wanted to do it the right way, but also said he would not pass on an opportunity that might arise in the future:

*I:* How do you see your life after release?

*Casper:* Just to be legit, do it the normal way. But with three children and a lot of debts ... things might happen. You never know how the future goes, if a nice opportunity comes by, I will not say no, but does that money really make me happy? I don't know, I don't think so. Time went quite fast in prison, but that doesn't mean I want to go back there ... no not really.

After release, he was not engaged in any criminal behavior even though some opportunities crossed his path: "No, for now I'm not doing anything. And maybe I will never do something again! And of course I've already had some offers, but I just say no ... not now."

One participant, Martin, was quite aware of the disadvantaged position he was in and expressed uncertainties about future offending:

I believe that if you really have the feeling that you're done with it, you are done. Then you start seeing the benefits of quitting crime and you will be blind to the benefits of continuing. I have to lay low for the time being when I'm on license, but I worry if I will be able to uphold this noncriminal behavior. I have never worked a day in my life. And with criminal friends around, I have to resist temptation.

During the postprison interview, he told us he fulfilled all the conditions of his parole, but also opened up about the criminal activities he was engaged in since release: “Mostly stuff that will not be reported to the police, such as ripping other dealers. They won’t go to the police to say that their drugs have been stolen.”

### ***Behavior not matching expectations***

Although most of the prerelease expectations corresponded with the postrelease behavior, there were a few exceptions. First, two men expected to refrain from crime after prison, but did not live up to their own expectations and were criminally active in the three months post release. Bart painted a rather carefree and noncriminal future during the in prison interview. He said:

We shall see what will happen, just work and earn money. I don’t do crazy things without a reason, but I don’t want to come back here anymore. I want to go out and work hard, as I’ve always done.

At the follow-up, Bart was back in prison. He showed no regret when talking about the new crime he got arrested for: “That money rightly belongs to me, it was my father’s. So I took control and handled it harshly, otherwise I wouldn’t get it back.”

Similarly, Jack was fired from the supported living facility (because he did not obey by the rules) and had no official address afterwards. This was seen as breaching his release conditions and at the same time he became a suspect in a new case. He was sent back to prison. He himself did not think he had done anything wrong. He was working and was not involved in any criminal activities according to him, so in his opinion he did not fail to meet his positive prerelease expectations.

On the other hand, two other men expected to be criminally active but they did not commit any crimes after release. For example, Pascal was quite sure about his criminal future when interviewed in prison:

I’m just going to continue my life as it was, I have taken a path in my life and I don’t see it change with my family and all ... and I don’t know any other kind of life and frankly, I also don’t want another life.

However, when he was asked about his involvement in any criminal activities at the follow up interview, he answered: “No, not at all, I don’t want that life anymore. I want to try to build something of my life, I don’t want to hurt people anymore.”

### **Explanatory mechanisms behind outcomes**

The detailed qualitative interviews with the men provided unique information on their own vision on why this was the case, as well as on general underlying patterns. From the data several reasons showed up.

## **Identity**

The concepts of the future possible self in combination with the feared self can be found in both pre- and postrelease interviews with participants with noncriminal expectations who also refrained from crime after release. They envisioned themselves being a good father (Dave) or being a sports instructor for children at risk (Nathan and Xavier) and combined this with notions of a feared self to motivate themselves to desist from crime. As Tom explained:

I have always taken Path A and I was always on the run, it was stressful and there was a lot of misery. I lost my best friend and ended up in a psychiatric institution. I'm sick of it! Now I'll try Path B. And it promises better things. Path B gives me the opportunity to work and get married with my girlfriend.

The two men who predicted to recidivate but did not three months after release, also mentioned a positive possible self and a fear about their future self if they were to continue engaging in criminal activities. However, these possible selves were only mentioned in the post release interview and were not present in their prerelease narrative. Pascal admitted in prison he could not see his life changing from criminal to non-criminal but now says he wants to try and make something of his life. He wants to become educated (possible self) and does not want to hurt people anymore (feared self).

In contrast, participants with ambivalent and criminal expectations did not seem to have a clear image of a future possible or feared self. In fact, the men with criminal expectations can hardly imagine a positive non-criminal self given the reentry challenges that await them and admit they think they are better off continuing the criminal life. For example, both Ab and Tony said that they do not think they are capable of surviving in the 'normal' world without engaging in crime.

## **Agency**

Second, the theme of agency—low or high feelings of being in control and making your own choices—occurred multiple times across all interviews. Participants who expected to refrain from crime and were indeed not engaged in criminal activity after release, took action immediately after release to maximize the chances of finding a job, for example sending out countless resumes or taking a low skilled job to earn money for their driving license.

The difference in agency between the early desisters, the ambivalent group and the ones that continued crime was whether or not they ascribed (the success of) their actions to themselves or to others. Those who expected to desist and did, saw the actions being a result of internal (themselves) rather than external (other) causes. For example, Richard was highly motivated to stay crime-free and experienced feelings of responsibility and getting more out

of life. He showed insight in the influence of his own attitude and belief in his postrelease success:

I am not two-faced anymore with different intentions. I am not a criminal anymore. And it gives so much space to be who you are. I don't ever want to be dependent anymore, I don't ever want to do anything with crime, it just doesn't fit in my world. I'm on a mission now: I want to be independent. All those prisoners complaining about authority in prison: if you don't want people telling you what to do, then you have to start making other choices. That way, you can be independent.

The positive cycle of success on the outside strengthening feelings of agency was also visible in the narrative of Pascal. As mentioned earlier, he expected to be involved in criminal activity but he arranged a place to live for himself and at the follow up interview he was positive and expressed feelings of joy being able to take care of himself and taking responsibility for his own future.

On the other hand, those who expected to recidivate and who did, said their behavior was largely due to other circumstances and for example put little effort in finding a job at first. According to them, they were entitled to some time to readjust from imprisonment. Their narratives revealed they were embedded in a criminal environment and they also believed that some external events early on brought them to a criminal lifestyle. They were still engaged in crime, not necessarily because they wanted to but because they felt they had no other option or because they thought it was all they were capable of. These feelings could be enhanced by difficulties in search of a job. Tony said he was really serious about finding employment but became well aware of the disadvantaged position he found himself in when he got frustrated being confronted with the offender label. For example, he explained his recidivism:

I really want to work, not in a store or something, but somewhere outside and active, even collecting garbage! I applied for that job, but they asked for a certificate of good conduct [disclosure of criminal records]. So then there you go, that's not going to work. What do they think: I'm going to murder someone while I'm collecting garbage?! I don't understand. But I don't need them. If they don't want me, then it's a pity for them. But still ... I do have to live during the week.

Two men who expected to refrain from crime minimized their involvement in actions that got them in prison again. Jack blamed it on the housing facility where he stayed but where he was kicked out of for breaking the rules. Bart justified his behavior by saying that if the victim had just listened, he would have not be involved in a serious crime again. He felt he was treated unjustly by the assaulted person and this was his response. He showed little insight into his own behavior and according to him, his positive future expectation regarding criminal behavior is still a realistic one as long as: "no one messes with him."



### **Social capital**

Third, data indicated that social capital—including support from family and partner—was relevant if they wanted to refrain from future crimes. Dave, who desisted from crime as he predicted in prison, pointed out the relationship with his family facilitated his attempts to refrain from crime:

I first had to wait three months before I got my social welfare benefits. Fortunately, I could lend some money from my dad, but If that is not an option ... then you have to wait a really long time and it is almost like you are being pushed towards crime. I am lucky to stay at my parents' house now, which gives me the chance to rebuild my life. Pay my debts, find a job, be stable. I was a bit nervous when I applied for the job, but I got a call the same week and they didn't ask anything about my past! I had to do a test to convince someone and I passed. So I am working there fulltime now.

Furthermore, his daughter kept him on the right path and he felt he had a new purpose in life. Moreover, finding well-paid employment enabled him to set new goals, gain confidence and keep his behavior in line with his purpose. Milo as well as Pascal knew they were going to be in a postrelease situation where the chances of success were low and they both predicted to continue crime. After release, their gains in social capital factors seemed to initiate motivation and persistence in refraining from crime, enabling them to move slowly towards a possible noncriminal self they started to envisage. Milo predicted he would return to crime, but upon release he felt support from his girlfriend and family to go straight which according to him: “helped him to go to work and behave well.” People around him took notice of his effort to refrain from crime and expressed their appreciation, which in turn strengthened him in his attempts to stay crime-free.

Weak social support from relatives, partner or children and no stable housing situation did seem to play a role in underestimating chances to be back in crime for participants with optimistic prerelease expectations who found themselves imprisoned again shortly after release.

### **Supervision**

Fourth, the role of supervision was mentioned as a reason for abiding by the rules. In Casper's case, being monitored closely and the risk to lose his house in case of a misstep were reasons for him to refrain from criminal activity:

I already did my time, but now I am being monitored. So they only need one finger-print or one DNA trace and they will find me! So I can choose to do it, take a high risk to get caught and lose everything like my house or I just don't do anything for a while.

Pascal felt the burden of the ankle bracelet and the obligatory alcohol and drug test in his life. He remembered that at New Year's Eve, he was not allowed to drink a glass of champagne and he could not be out on the street

in the evening. So instead of being frustrated at midnight and maybe doing “stupid things,” he went to bed at 8’o clock in the evening. He realized the drug and alcohol tests kept him sober and gave room for clear thinking. At the follow-up, he said he was proud of himself and did not want that criminal life anymore. The social burden of the ankle bracelet was mentioned several times by multiple participants (across all types of expectations). For the ambivalent group, the strict supervision rules did seem to inhibit the tendency towards crime, but it is worth mentioning that when the social network is weak and new opportunities for social interactions are scarce, the ankle bracelet can impede the chance of new encounters.

## Discussion

This article contributes to the relatively underresearched topic of the role of future expectations in criminal behavior and factors that play a role in the transition to society and early attempts at desistance. We focused on a group of prisoners who was responsible for serious (violent) crimes and who was serving an average sentence length of four years. The aim of this article was to examine the expectations of prisoners regarding their future criminal behavior before they are released, whether or not these expectations came true after their release from prison and understand why they did or did not meet these expectations. Based on recent literature, we expected that prisoners with noncriminal future expectations would engage in goal-oriented behavior towards this expectation and therefore be more likely to refrain from criminal activity after release. Prisoners being ambivalent about their future regarding criminal behavior were expected to be more likely to engage in criminal activity when success after release is low.

From the prerelease interviews, three groups of prisoners emerged: prisoners with a noncriminal future expectation, those with a criminal future expectation, and those with a more ambivalent future expectation. Main results suggest a strong match between the noncriminal and criminal expectations and postrelease criminal behavior. For these two types of expectations, almost all men in our sample seemed to be fairly accurate about the postrelease outcomes. There were, however, a few exceptions with some men that recidivated while not predicted and some men that refrained from crime although they expected they would still be engaged in criminal activity. Furthermore, almost all the men with ambivalent forecasts refrained from criminal activity at the follow up interview. Four underlying mechanisms were identified from the reasons given by the men to explain the results: possible selves, agency, social capital, and supervision.

First, according to Identity Theory of Desistance (ITD) (Paternoster & Bushway, 2009), the findings suggest that visualizing a positive possible self and a feared self indeed contributed to motivation to refrain from crime and

striving towards the goals mentioned before release. Even for the unexpected early desisters, notions of possible selves together with social capital success encouraged desistance. No clear notions of possible selves were found in the ambivalent narratives so they were abstaining from crime for different reasons.

Second, feelings of control and ascribing behavior to self-motivation and perseverance were identified in the data, which is in line with previous work emphasizing the importance of agency (King, 2013; Laub & Sampson, 2003; Maruna, 2001). The men that were abstaining for crime said that their success on the outside was a product of their own effort and the ones that continued crime said their engagement in criminal activities was due to external events. In line with previous research (Healy, 2010), attempts to refrain from crime were challenged if the conventional life provided a lower sense of self-esteem than the criminal life. It is possible that the men who continued crime felt as if they were “doomed to deviance” (Maruna, 2001), having few chances on the outside and felt like they were being pushed to crime. Once released, they experienced the “pain of goal failure” (Nugent & Schinkel, 2016; Schinkel, 2014), which seem to prove them right about their feelings of being doomed. Their pre-release criminal forecasts were just plain realistic according to them, especially because any effort to start a conventional lifestyle (as a part of their conditional release) failed and proved them right. They were not successful in displaying resilience in the face of reentry challenges (Harvey & Delfabbro, 2004; Rutter, 2012).

Third, social capital, which links to informal social control theory (Sampson & Laub, 1993), seemed to facilitate moving away from crime. Early desisters were actively seeking social support (Shapland & Bottoms, 2011) and prosocial bonds with partners and family and this facilitated “relational desistance” (Nugent & Schinkel, 2016) in several ways. Material support such as helping out with debts and offering a place to stay, and also the appreciation shown by loved ones when going straight, contributed to motivation to keep striving and overcoming obstacles.

A fourth mechanism was the role of supervision which supports the notion of formal social control (Sampson & Laub, 1993). Being supervised appears to constrain the tendency towards crime,<sup>6</sup> but also led to the “pain of isolation” (Nugent & Schinkel, 2016; Schinkel, 2014). Prisoners with ambivalent future expectations but refraining from crime after release illustrated the pain of isolation: they were low on social capital and lived quite isolated to avoid temptation, thinking they would not be able to resist. Being supervised by the probation services with curfews and drug bans meant that the chance to be sent back to prison to finish the rest of their sentence was high. This could also be the reason that the participants who had criminal expectations and were indeed engaging in criminal activity, were involved in less serious crimes in order to stay under the radar. This way, they could combine their supervised conditional release with dealing drugs and still be able to take care of themselves.

Our findings are partially in line with what we expected based on recent literature. Prisoners with a noncriminal forecast were indeed successfully engaged in striving towards a life without crime, and other goals (Scheier & Carver, 1992). The criminal expectations also corresponded to the postrelease behavior. The ambivalent however, were for the most part not engaged in criminal activity at the follow up three months after release, which is not what we expected, especially since they were low on social capital. The absence of meaningful social bonds is a result also found across other studies (e.g., Schinkel, 2014) and can be quite problematic in the process of rehabilitation. Researchers argue that desistance is a product of individual factors and social capital relations (King, 2013; Laub & Sampson, 2003; Maruna, 2001) and that desistance blooms when the change in behavior of the person is recognized and appreciated by others (Maruna, Lebel, Mitchell, & Naples, 2004; Nugent & Schinkel, 2016). Since these prisoners with ambivalent expectations did not have strong social support, their efforts in changing their behavior were hardly noticed by anyone, maybe only by their probation officer. For this group, it will be crucial to achieve small successes but also to be “rewarded” for it in order to achieve “relational desistance” (Nugent & Schinkel, 2016), which is not something they can achieve by themselves.

While this study has major strengths, it also has some limitations. We interviewed a relatively small sample of male prisoners in the Netherlands, yet the sample was based on a list that contained all the imprisoned men that fitted the criteria. Every prisoner that was scheduled to be released could be included in the research. Our study is explorative in nature and we do not attempt to generalize findings from this sample to a whole population but aim to contribute insight into the transition from prison to society and early attempts at desistance. Since the imprisonment length of the sample of prisoners used in this study is quite similar to the average imprisonment length in other countries such as the US (see Kuhn, 1996), the results of our study might be relevant to prisoners elsewhere. Future research on prisoners with similar sentences (and not life sentences) in other countries is needed to see if the results from this study also apply to other settings. Second, since the data collected was all based on self-report, one may argue that participants underreported less desirable behaviors or that prisoners with positive forecasts were giving more socially desirable answers and maybe felt the need to paint a brighter picture at the follow-up interview to keep up appearances. Nevertheless, how the men presented themselves provides useful insight even if the ones who said to be confident about their future felt the need to construct an imaginary reality if they were indeed reoffending after release. Third, this study has focused on the early stage of the desistance process by using a qualitative longitudinal design, which included the period before release and the first three months after. The short follow-up period limits the findings to very early attempts at

desistance. Longitudinal research with a longer follow-up is recommended to see how these processes of change evolve and the mechanisms that play a role when participants spend more time in the community. However, the presented accounts of these prisoners offered valuable insights into the transition from prison to society and those first challenging months after release where one's mindset may shape behavior. Furthermore, findings suggested that ambivalent future expectations that do not evolve into criminal behavior can be initially constrained by the conditional release and a fear of going back instead of strong agentic factors. Recent research (Healy & O'Donnell, 2008) also illustrated that agency can be weak at first and increase when a person takes some successful steps on the road to desistance. This could well be the case for the men with ambivalent expectations. More research on this topic and a longer follow up is needed to clarify how this interaction works.

This article has presented the first findings of a qualitative longitudinal study of returning prisoners and early desistance. Since expectations influence behavior, knowledge on this topic for prisoners can contribute to improving processes of reentry. Future research should focus on results from a longer follow up to see how prerelease expectations develop into behavior and how these expectations interact with the road to desistance.

## Notes

1. Only the group that was in prison for four years or more showed lower recidivism rates (37.7%; WODC Dutch Recidivism Monitor, 2016).
2. Note that Institutions for Repeat Offenders (ISD) were excluded.
3. The original list encompassed 363 men, but 279 men could already be excluded for various reasons: they were already staying outside of prison, for example in a sheltered housing concept or in a minimum security prison; they were revolving-door criminals; they were convicted for a sex offense; or they were staying at a psychiatric prison.
4. Participants refusing to participate or did not show up ( $n = 4$ ), participants that could not be reached when visiting the prison ( $n = 4$ ), for example because they were placed in solitary confinement or due to administrative problems.
5. For two participants we uncovered that they were convicted for a sex offense after all, and two participants received another sentence while imprisoned, which meant they would not be released any time soon and therefore had to be excluded. One prisoner was detained for a shorter time than we initially thought and three prisoners appeared to be in appeal.
6. Positive results when being supervised could also be related to what has been known as the "Hawthorne effect" (Ruch & Zimbardo, 1971).

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